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## ARTICLE

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# THE LACK OF CONSENSUS AMONG CATHOLICS FOR ESTABLISHING NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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*For a century Catholic schools have formed the basis for a strong system of acculturation into Catholic identity and values. Catholic schools provided a low-cost basic education and served as a common school for all social classes of Catholics. This system has weakened considerably in the last decades. Between 1970 and 2000 there was a net loss of 3,595 Catholic schools in the United States, a 29.9% decline. In addition, the nature of these schools seems to be changing as the percentage of total Catholic school enrollment made up by non-Catholics has increased ten-fold in 30 years. Many Catholic schools seem to have pursued increased academic excellence at the expense of religious acculturation. This paper examines diocesan data to determine the extent to which Catholics still consider Catholic elementary schools to be important. Findings include survey data on school importance from 55,000 diocesan Catholics. In addition, parishioner survey results are presented from two suburban parishes, each of which is considering establishing a parochial elementary school. If new elementary schools are going to be established, a way must be found for Catholics to arrive at a consensus on this issue.*

For most Catholics over the age of 50, the presence of Catholic elementary schools was often taken for granted. In 1852 the First Plenary Council of Baltimore urged every Catholic parish in the United States to establish a school. Due in part to the numbers of religious sisters that became available for educational ministry, schools were established at a rapid pace. By 1900 about 3,500 parochial schools were in existence. Within 20 years, there were 6,551 schools, with 41,581 teachers instructing 1,759,673 pupils. By the mid-1960s, there were 4.5 million elementary Catholic school pupils, an all-time high (National Catholic Educational Association, n.d., pp.12-17).

Since this zenith point of enrollment, fewer children are enrolling in fewer Catholic schools. Between 1970 and 2000 Catholic elementary school enrollment has declined by 44.5%, a loss of 1.6 million students. While some

of this decline is undoubtedly due to the baby boomers exiting the school system, demographics do not explain the whole change. If the decline were primarily due to a general decrease in the school-age population—presuming a fairly constant Catholic percentage of the population—one would expect to see a similar decline in public schools. Yet in the same 30-year period public elementary school enrollment increased by 3% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004a, p.1).

Data from the *Official Catholic Directory* show that between 1970 and 2000 there was a net loss of 3,595 Catholic schools in the United States, a 29.9% decline. In its 2004 report, the National Catholic Educational Association noted that, while 34 new Catholic schools were opened in the last school year, there was a net loss of 45 schools. Catholic school enrollment is 2,484,252, a 2.7% decrease over one year. The NCEA pointed out, however, that one-third of schools have waiting lists (National Catholic Educational Association, 2004, pp.1-5).

Why are there waiting lists when enrollment is decreasing? Due to demographic changes and population shifts, there are Catholic schools in urban areas without a nearby Catholic population to support them. Meanwhile, newer suburban areas are lacking schools though there are thousands of potential students. This situation has captured the attention of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, who wrote, “Our challenge today is to provide schools close to where our Catholic people live. In areas where there currently are no Catholic schools, we should open schools that have a mission to evangelize. We also need to consider providing new or expanded facilities where we currently have schools with waiting lists” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

Clearly, much has changed over the past 30-40 years to bring about this situation. Kollar (2003) identifies 15 examples of radical change in significant categories of education and religion in Catholic schools over the last 50 years. Among the most relevant for purposes of this paper are the following.

1. *The reasons parents send their children to Catholic schools have changed.* In the past social and religious pressures were most important. Now parents choose Catholic schools so that their children will be safe, educated, formed in faith, and become disciplined.
2. *The meaning and sense of the Catholic community has changed,* from a community based on ethnicity and common societal oppression to one that is accepted as part of the larger civic society.
3. *The identity of Catholic schools has changed.* Catholic schools no longer exist to protect immigrants from the civic society and to integrate them into this society. Instead Catholic schools are re-defining

themselves, with different identities being chosen according to local customs and beliefs.

4. *The treatment of non-Catholics in Catholic schools has changed.* Non-Catholics are often the overwhelming majority in urban schools and, due to interfaith acknowledgement, are accepted in suburban schools.

Baker and Riordan (1998) write that the typical American Catholic school is fast becoming an elite private school, where indoctrination into faith is taking a back seat to academic preparation. In support of this view, they note that less than a fifth of Catholic elementary school-aged children now attend a Catholic school. They contend that the Catholic school system is kept alive by the non-Catholics who are seeking the academic benefits that are perceived to come with enrollment in Catholic schools. In 1972, less than 2% of all Catholic secondary school students were non-Catholic; recent data show that more than 20% of the Catholic secondary school population is non-Catholic. Furthermore, in 1996 only 45% of Catholic high school principals identified the "religious development of the student" as their school's primary mission (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004b).

After analyzing the decades-old decline in Catholic schools, Baker and Riordan found that "[t]hese declines would be substantially larger were it not for the fact that a significant proportion of students attending Catholic schools are those who are fleeing the public schools. These students are increasingly non-Catholic, non-religious, non-white, and solidly middle-class. Many of these students and their parents, who have temporarily saved Catholic schools from virtual extinction, have no primary interest in Catholicism" (Baker & Riordan, 1998).

This paper examines diocesan data to determine the extent to which Catholics still consider Catholic elementary schools important enough to support. If new elementary schools are going to be established, a way must be found for Catholics to arrive at a consensus on this issue.

## METHODOLOGY

While similar dynamics are found in both Catholic elementary schools and secondary schools, this paper explores only elementary schools, due to the availability of diocesan survey data about them. It examines existing diocesan data to determine the extent to which Catholics in the Rockford Diocese value Catholic elementary schools in the abstract and consider them to be strategically important enough to establish new schools. There are two sources of pertinent data: (1) a 1997 diocesan-wide survey that was a part of a diocesan planning project; and (2) parish surveys in 2002 and 2003 from two suburban parishes, each of which was considering establishing a new

parochial elementary school.

The diocesan survey shows the theoretical importance of Catholic elementary schools, relative to many other forms of contemporary ministry. Moving from the theoretical to the very practical, the parish surveys measure support of parishioners for establishing new elementary schools in their own parishes in the near future. The results of each survey will be compared and contrasted to determine the extent of support by Catholics for establishing new elementary schools.

## **THE DIOCESAN SURVEY**

In September 1997, the Rockford Diocese administered a questionnaire to all Catholics, aged 16 and above, who were attending Mass in one of the 105 diocesan parishes.<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire contained 34 descriptors of a vital parish and eight demographic questions. For each of the descriptors, parishioners indicated via a 4-point Likert scale both the theoretical importance of the item, and the extent to which it is realized in the parish. Relevant to this study is the 30th descriptor: "Children have access to a Catholic elementary school in the area." Focus in this analysis is upon the theoretical importance of Catholic schools, as identified through this question.

More than 55,000 usable surveys were returned to the diocesan Research and Planning Office for tabulation and analysis. The analyses presented here use both item rankings and mean scores because the key issue is the importance of access to Catholic schools relative to other aspects of parish life. A misleading picture could emerge by using just mean scores. For example, the mean score of the school access statement, examined in isolation, may imply that parishioners consider Catholic elementary schools to be quite important. Yet comparing this mean to the mean of the other 33 items may reveal that the relative importance of school access is quite low.

Tests of statistical significance across independent variables are not shown because they are irrelevant. Such tests estimate the likelihood that a sample of a population represents the entire population. In this study, however, virtually the entire population (Catholics attending Mass) completed questionnaires.

## **THE SUBURBAN PARISH SURVEYS**

Two diocesan parishes located in Chicago suburbs asked the diocesan Research and Planning Office for assistance in determining whether their parishioners would support the establishment of a Catholic elementary school. The first was Holy Cross Parish, Batavia, which had 2,428 parishioner households in 2002 when its mailed survey was administered to all reg-

istered households. In 1975 Holy Cross Parish, with 634 households at the time, closed its elementary school in an old neighborhood. By 1994 the high growth in the area led the parish to relocate its facilities to a 19-acre parcel in an open area on the far side of town. On this property the parish had built a new church, with connecting parish offices and meeting rooms. To re-establish a school, the parish would have to construct proper educational facilities, and raise ordinary income by 30% to provide for ongoing school operation.

Located just to the south of Holy Cross Parish is the second suburban parish, Blessed Sacrament Parish, North Aurora. Blessed Sacrament is a relatively new parish, having been founded in 1970. Though the parish never had a parochial school, it had just constructed an educational building for religious education classes that could be modified for full-time school use at relatively low cost. In 2003 a survey was administered to its 698 registered parishioner households. To establish a school, the parish would need to raise funds for the building conversion and raise income by 30% for ongoing school operation.

The Research and Planning Office designed similar surveys for Holy Cross Parish and Blessed Sacrament Parish, and utilized the same methodology for administration. This allows inter-parish comparisons to be made. In addition, comparisons could be made between the two parish surveys and the diocesan-wide survey.

## **FINDINGS**

### **THE DIOCESAN SURVEY**

The Rockford Diocese is composed of about 370,000 Catholics in 105 parishes. The territory of the diocese includes 11 counties, stretching from rural counties along the Mississippi River to fast-growing suburban counties that are part of metropolitan Chicago. Two-thirds of diocesan Catholics are found in the two counties that are part of the Chicago region. Most parishes of the Rockford Diocese are relatively small and do not have schools, but most Catholics are members of larger parishes with schools. While the results of this study cannot be generalized to a wider population than the Rockford Diocese, the heterogeneous composition of this diocese in major demographic categories suggests that there may be a wider usefulness of the findings.

Preliminary analysis showed that the presence of an existing elementary school is the strongest predictor of the theoretical importance of access to a Catholic elementary school. For parishes with schools, access to these schools is ranked 10th in overall importance (mean = 3.47 on the 4-point

scale) while in parishes without schools access is ranked only 30th (mean = 2.98). Because of this finding, the presence of an existing elementary school was always cross-tabulated with other independent variables. It is important to note that some people registered in parishes without schools may have had direct experience with Catholic elementary schools before moving to their current parishes.

### Age

Being a member of a parish with a school correlates well with a considerably higher ranking of the importance of a Catholic elementary school. Table 1 demonstrates that this holds true for each age group, but it is especially striking for the two oldest age groups. For parishioners over age 65 who are members of parishes with schools, nothing is more important than the school. For parishioners over age 65 who are members of parishes without schools, there are 29 elements of parish life that are more important than an elementary school.

Table 1

*The Impact of Age on the Importance of Catholic Elementary Schools: Diocesan Survey*

Age	No school rank (Mean score)	School rank (Mean score)
16-25	30 (2.89)	12 (3.37)
26-35	24 (3.07)	7 (3.53)
36-45	30 (2.88)	12 (3.42)
46-55	32 (2.86)	12 (3.41)
56-65	30 (3.03)	5 (3.49)
66 and above	30 (3.12)	1 (3.59)

*Notes.* Because virtually the entire population of adult Catholics attending Mass completed surveys, tests of significance are not relevant and are not shown.

### Length of Time in a Parish

Table 2 demonstrates that length of time in a parish is associated with diverging views on the importance of school access. For people in a parish without a school, there is a negative correlation between time in the parish and importance of access to Catholic elementary school. This pattern is not seen among people in parishes with schools. Undoubtedly this table illustrates an

age effect, especially for those people in a parish more than 10 years; in this group 67% are age 66 and above. The table also shows, however, the importance of length of time in a parish apart from one's age. Even when ignoring the highest age category — where the age effect would be most likely to be seen — the ranking of the importance of school access drops from 24th to 30th for people in a parish without a school. For people in a parish with a school, however, the same ranking of importance is fairly constant, either 11th or 12th.

Table 2

*The Impact of Length of Residence on the Importance of Catholic Elementary Schools:  
Diocesan Survey*

Time in parish	No school rank (Mean score)	School rank (Mean score)
Less than 2 years	24 (3.11)	11 (3.48)
2-5 years	27 (3.05)	12 (3.44)
6-10 years	30 (2.96)	2 (3.43)
More than 10 years	31 (2.91)	5 (3.49)

*Notes.* Because virtually the entire population of adult Catholics attending Mass completed surveys, tests of significance are not relevant and are not shown.

**Other Key Variables**

Tables 1 and 2 present two important variables that can be matched well to items from the two parish surveys. Thus the importance of age and length of time in a parish can be examined from both a theoretical diocesan perspective and a pragmatic parish perspective. There were three other variables in the diocesan survey, however, that presented useful information for understanding the dynamics around access to Catholic elementary schools. These variables are: (1) frequency of Mass attendance; (2) parish involvement; and (3) attachment to the parish.<sup>2</sup>

For people who are in parishes without schools, Mass attendance is not correlated with school importance. For people in parishes with schools, however, weekly attendees value the school more than those who attend less frequently.

For people in parishes without schools, parish involvement is not correlated with school importance. For people in parishes with schools, an unusual finding for people from parishes with schools is that the most active



parishioners rank school access lower than less active parishioners.<sup>3</sup> While this finding may be surprising, it is consistent with previous research. Cieslak (2003) discovered that parishes in which the school is rated as highly important tend to offer fewer opportunities for parishioner involvement.<sup>4</sup>

For people in parishes without schools, the more one is subjectively attached to the parish, the less important elementary school access is.<sup>5</sup> For people in parishes with schools, the more one is attached to the parish, the more important school access becomes. Since there is a moderately strong correlation between attachment to the parish and length of time in a parish, this variable may be demonstrating the same dynamics.

## **SUMMARY OF DIOCESAN-WIDE SURVEY DATA**

Two noteworthy results come to the fore. First, the single most important variable in predicting whether access to a Catholic elementary school is perceived as important among parishioners of a particular parish is the current presence of a Catholic elementary school at the parish. In virtually all analyses, across all levels of the independent variables, people in parishes with schools ranked Catholic elementary access as considerably more important than people in parishes without schools.

Second, age magnifies these results, especially among the highest two age groups. The single greatest support for Catholic elementary schools comes from people age 66 and above, but only if they are from parishes with schools. Strong support among this age group is absent in parishes without schools.

Other variables that seem to be important in their own right—length of time in a parish, and Mass attendance—may be manifestations of age. Finally, parish involvement and parish attachment may indicate that parishes with schools have relatively fewer opportunities for parishioner involvement than parishes without schools.

## **THE SUBURBAN PARISH SURVEYS**

The findings from the 1997 diocesan survey were based upon a question about the theoretical importance of access to a Catholic elementary school. In 2002 and 2003 there was opportunity to measure the importance of the Catholic elementary school in a pragmatic setting, among the parishioners of two parishes that were considering establishing new schools.

### **Holy Cross Parish, Batavia**

Parishioners in Holy Cross Parish were presented with three options to address educational needs associated with its rapid growth: (1) do not build

new facilities; (2) build a parish religious education building; and (3) build a parish elementary school, which could be used for the religious education of public school students in the evenings and on weekends. The 40-year-old pastor favored the building of a school and encouraged parishioners to support this concept in their surveys. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be upon the third option.

By the time analysis started, a total of 1,441 households had returned surveys. This represents 59.3% of households registered in the parish. The parish was fairly evenly split on the issue of building a parish school. Slightly more parishioners supported the concept (44.9%) than opposed it (40.9%), with 14.2% undecided. Two independent variables were available from the survey that closely matched questions in the diocesan survey: age, and length of time in the parish. Table 3 shows the cross tabulation of support for the proposed school by age, while Table 4 shows the cross tabulation by length of time in the parish.

Table 3

*Support for Establishing a Catholic Elementary School at Holy Cross Parish, Batavia, by Age*

Age	Support	Undecided	Oppose
16-24	77.8%	0.0%	22.2%
25-34	65.0%	15.3%	19.7%
35-44	51.8%	14.9%	33.3%
45-54	36.1%	10.9%	53.0%
55-64	33.9%	15.8%	50.3%
65 or more	36.0%	17.2%	46.8%

*Notes.* To measure the degree to which age predicts support for a new school, the Somers' *d* test of statistical significance was used. For the entire table  $p < .001$ .

Table 3 shows a dramatic age effect, beginning around age 45. For people younger than this age, 55.5% support starting a Catholic school. For respondents age 45 or above, only 35.6% support such a venture. Unlike the diocesan survey, however, people in the oldest age group do not differ substantially in school support from those in the 45-54 and 55-64 age groups.

Table 4

*Support for Establishing a Catholic Elementary School at Holy Cross Parish, Batavia, by Length of Time in the Parish*

Time in Parish	Support	Undecided	Oppose
Less than 2 years	61.7%	14.9%	23.4%
2-5 years	54.6%	14.1%	31.3%
6-9 years	44.5%	14.1%	41.4%
10-14 years	36.8%	17.0%	46.2%
15 years or more	33.3%	11.9%	54.8%

*Notes.* To measure the degree to which the time in the parish predicts support for a new school, the Somers'  $d$  test of statistical significance was used. For the entire table  $p < .001$ .

Table 4 shows that the longer people have been attending Holy Cross Parish, the less likely it is that they will support establishing a parochial school. The level of support reaches its zenith among those in the parish less than 2 years, and its nadir among those in the parish 15 or more years.

Table 3 demonstrates that younger people are more likely to express support for a school, and Table 4 shows that people relatively new to Holy Cross Parish are also more likely to express support for a school. Are these tables expressing the same dynamics, since there is a positive correlation between age and the length of time registered at the parish? Table 5 attempts to answer this question by looking at the percentage of people that support a school across both age and time variables. To simplify the display, both age and length of time at Holy Cross were dichotomized.

Table 5

*Percentage of People Supporting the Establishment of a Catholic Elementary School at Holy Cross Parish, Batavia, by Age and Length of Time in the Parish*

Age	Time at Holy Cross		Total
	< 6 years	6+ years	
19-44	61.6%	47.9%	55.3%
45+	48.0%	32.4%	35.6%
Total	57.5%	37.7%	44.8%

The only people that express majority support for a school are people younger than age 45 who have been in the parish for less than 6 years. Just under majority support is shown by people age 45 or over who have been in the parish less than 6 years (48.0%), and people under age 45 who have been in the parish 6 or more years (47.9%). Finally, the lowest support (32.4%) is shown by people age 45 or over who have been in the parish for 6 or more years.

The people less likely to support parochial elementary schools are: (1) those age 45 or older; or (2) those who have been in the parish for at least 6 years. It is interesting to consider the younger group that has been in the parish for 6 or more years. They are more like the older parishioners than they are like their own age cohort. Among younger parishioners, there are some dynamics associated with being a parishioner a longer period of time that lessen the desire for a school. Perhaps it is due to experience with a good parish religious education program, or perhaps it is due to a changing concept of parish. For some people, especially those who have moved to suburban Batavia from an area with an abundance of parochial schools, the idea of a parish without a school may be unthinkable. After several years in the parish, however, the parish's *raison d'être* may no longer be seen to be the provider of a school.

### **Blessed Sacrament Parish, North Aurora**

Parishioners in Blessed Sacrament Parish were presented with two options about future educational needs: (1) do not open a school and keep using the new educational building for religious education classes; and (2) open a parochial elementary school in the new building while still making the building available for the religious education of public school students in the evenings and on weekends. The 76-year-old pastor was neutral about the establishment of a school. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be on the option of opening a parochial school.

By the time analysis started, a total of 471 households returned surveys, representing 67.5% of parish registered households. Parishioners were asked about each option separately (support/undecided/do not support) and then asked to indicate their preferred choice. In this way they could indicate support for both options before being forced to choose their preferred option.

A plurality of parish respondents (41.0%) opposed establishing a school, while 28.5% supported the concept and 22.3% were undecided. Parishioner respondents seemed to indicate a high degree of polarization on the issue. Over 72% of those who support the present policy (religious education use only) do not support the second, while over 83% of those who support establishing a school do not support the present policy.

As with Holy Cross' survey, there are two independent variables that closely match questions in the diocesan survey: age, and length of time in the parish. Table 6 shows the cross tabulation of support for the proposed school by age, while Table 7 shows the cross tabulation by length of time in the parish.

Table 6

*Support for Establishing a Catholic Elementary School at Blessed Sacrament Parish, North Aurora, by Age*

Age	Support	Undecided	Oppose
16-24	---	---	---
25-34	46.8%	25.5%	27.7%
35-44	35.5%	27.3%	37.2%
45-54	41.5%	18.5%	40.0%
55-64	27.8%	24.1%	48.1%
65 or more	18.5%	25.2%	56.3%

*Notes.* To measure the degree to which age predicts support for a new school, the Somers' *d* test of statistical significance was used. For the entire table  $p < .001$ .

Table 6 is similar to Table 3, in that support for establishing a parochial school decreases with age. Table 3 shows, however, that support at Holy Cross is 15-20 percentage points higher at each age level. Also, the age threshold where support decreases is slightly different (45-54 at Holy Cross and 55-64 at Blessed Sacrament).

Table 7

*Support for Establishing a Catholic Elementary School at Blessed Sacrament Parish, North Aurora, by Length of Time in the Parish*

Time in Parish	Support	Undecided	Oppose
Less than 2 years	48.6%	20.0%	31.4%
2-5 years	43.9%	23.4%	32.7%
6-9 years	31.9%	24.6%	43.5%
10-14 years	25.0%	25.0%	50.0%
15 years or more	19.7%	25.9%	54.4%

*Notes.* To measure the degree to which length of time in the parish predicts support for a new school, the Somers' *d* test of statistical significance was used. For the entire table  $p < .001$ .

Table 7 is similar to Table 4, with parochial school support decreasing with length of time in the parish. Again, support at Holy Cross is about 15 percentage points higher at each level of time in the parish.

In order to determine how age and time at Blessed Sacrament are related, these variables are cross-tabulated, as they were with Holy Cross data. Table 8 demonstrates the results. Associated with a relatively low level of school support is either: (1) being age 55 or older; or (2) being in the parish for at least 6 years.

Table 8

*Percentage of People Supporting the Establishment of a Catholic Elementary School at Blessed Sacrament Parish, North Aurora, by Age and Length of Time in the Parish*

Age	Time at Blessed Sacrament		Total
	< 6 years	6+ years	
< 55	51.9%	28.2%	39.5%
55+	24.2%	20.9%	21.2%
Total	45.1%	24.2%	31.0%

Comparing Table 8 with the Holy Cross data in Table 5, one finds quite similar results. In each case: (1) the top left data cell has the highest level of support, with both over 50%; (2) the top right cell and the bottom left cell are close in value, with neither showing majority support; and (3) the bottom right cell shows the lowest level of support. But there are two differences.

First, the values in Table 5 are generally 10-15 percentage points higher, showing a higher level of support for a school at Holy Cross. Second, the age threshold—where support for a school drops somewhat dramatically—differs slightly, being 45 at Holy Cross and 55 at Blessed Sacrament.

It is likely that the somewhat higher support for a new Catholic school at Holy Cross is due to vocal pastor support of a new school, as well as lack of access to any other nearby Catholic elementary school. These items are discussed below. The difference in age thresholds of support may be spurious or it may be due to the residual negative effects of the 1975 closing of the old Holy Cross parish elementary school. This closing may have reached deeply into the corporate psyche of the parish, making it less likely that today's parishioners want to build another school.

## **SUMMARY OF THE PARISH SURVEY DATA**

Data from two suburban parishes without schools show similar results. In each case only a minority of parishioners tend to support the creation of a parochial elementary school, and the younger parishioners support the concept more than the older respondents. Also, the longer that one has been a member of the parish, the more one is disinclined to support the creation of a school; this holds for all age groups.

The main difference between the two parishes is that a higher percentage of parishioners from Holy Cross (44.9%) were more likely to support the creation of a school than were parishioners from Blessed Sacrament (28.5%). This difference is somewhat surprising when one considers that Blessed Sacrament already has a new education building constructed and paid for, while Holy Cross would need to construct a new education building at considerable expense. The results are somewhat inconsistent with the 1997 diocesan survey, which revealed that more Blessed Sacrament parishioners (79.0%) considered Catholic elementary school access to be important or very important, compared to Holy Cross parishioners (70.6%). The effects of a change in pastors at Holy Cross between the 1997 study and the 2002 survey may be seen here.

While no empirical data exist that can totally explain the difference between these parishes in support for the creation of a new Catholic elementary school, it is likely that one or more of the following factors influence the level of support.

1. *Pastor Support.* The 40-year-old pastor of Holy Cross Parish energetically promoted the idea of a parochial school while the 76-year-old pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish was neutral toward the idea of a parochial school. These dynamics raise important questions about the

leadership role of the pastor in promoting various initiatives. Is strong pastor leadership necessary, but not sufficient in itself, as the Holy Cross results suggest? Do middle-aged Catholics reflexively resist strong pastor leadership, perhaps in reaction to commanding clerical authority in their pre-Vatican II childhoods? Unfortunately, there are no questions in the surveys that allow a valid exploration of these questions.

2. *Access to Nearby Catholic Schools.* If parents from Holy Cross Parish want to send their children to a Catholic school, no reasonable alternatives to a parochial school exist. While there are two parochial Catholic elementary schools within a reasonable driving distance, both have waiting lists and are closed to non-parishioners. Meanwhile, Blessed Sacrament Parish parents have access to a parochial Catholic school in nearby Aurora.
3. *Parish Size.* It is possible that parishioners of Holy Cross Parish, with 2,428 registered households, could visualize themselves with a school more easily than parishioners of the considerably smaller Blessed Sacrament Parish, with 698 households.

## DISCUSSION

The Catholic school system of the 21st century will certainly look different from the Catholic school system of the 20th century, if for no other reason than because Catholics have been well integrated into society and no longer need the social isolation that Catholic schools offered. Historically these schools existed, at least in part, to acculturate new members into the Catholic Church. Today the Catholic laity seem to be uncertain not only about the school system's effectiveness in fulfilling this function, but about its very desirability. Data provided in this report indicate the absence of a consensus among the people of God on this issue.

While it would be facile to reduce the decline in Catholic school enrollment to pragmatic issues, such as tuition, it is likely that the causes find their roots in philosophical differences in two key areas: the mission of the Catholic school and the educational mission of the parish.

## THE MISSION OF THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL

What is the primary mission of the Catholic school? Is it to form the students according to the teachings and values of the Catholic Church, or to provide them with a high-quality academic education? According to Kollar (2003), and Baker and Riordan (1998), the primary mission is no longer religious acculturation. These opinions were confirmed by a 1996 survey of the prin-



cipals of Catholic high schools, which found that a majority did not consider the “religious development of the student” to be their school’s primary mission. Even the U.S. Catholic bishops place a strong focus on academics when they state that Catholic schools offer a unique education: “excellent academics imparted in the context of Catholic teaching and practice” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

It is likely that no single entity—not bishops, principals, teachers, or parents—should bear the blame for an unclear Catholic school mission, since this uncertainty reflects the absence of a clear consensus by Catholics on the mission of the Church in a postmodern society. This topic is clearly beyond the scope of this paper and it deserves a fuller exposition.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE PARISH**

It was surprising to discover the extent to which older Catholics in parishes without schools do not support the creation of new Catholic schools. In the diocesan-wide survey, people in parishes without schools rank the importance of Catholic school access considerably lower than people in parishes with schools. The most dramatic results are found in the 56-65 and the 66 and older age groups. For both age groups in parishes without schools, access to a Catholic elementary school is ranked 30th of 34 parish attributes. This differs considerably from the attitudes of people in parishes with schools, where school access is ranked fifth and first, respectively. These diocesan-wide results were borne out in the surveys of two suburban parishes.

It is unlikely that new Catholic schools will be opened if middle-aged and older parishioners do not support them. These cohorts have the largest amount of disposable income and are usually considered the backbone of parish financial support. The key question is: why is there such a large difference in support? In the heyday of Catholic schools, education was commonly perceived as the mission of the entire parish. What changed? Some comments written on the suburban parish questionnaires suggest that parishioners without school-age children do not want to assist in the Catholic school education of other Catholics. In other words, the educational mission of the parish has changed for some from “serving all parishioner children” to “serving my children.” This topic, too, seems to be related to lack of a clear consensus on the mission of the Church. The diminishment of the parish educational mission can have severely negative repercussions upon the life of the Church.

## **PASTORAL OPTIONS**

One option to address the above issues is to initiate parish discussions among older parishioners and those who do not support Catholic elementary

schools. A skilled facilitator may be able to help non-supporters identify key reasons for lack of support. Comments added to the two parish surveys suggest that pragmatic reasons play an important part in determining support among many parishioner households. These include family finances, parish debt, and the general state of the economy. Yet previous research (Cieslak 2003) found that parishes in which the school is rated as highly important tend to offer fewer opportunities for parishioner involvement, perhaps because of fewer parish ministries.

For some people, then, the presence of a parochial elementary school may be a threat to other aspects of a parish's mission. To help these people become supporters of Catholic schools one must begin by understanding their motivation and taking steps to insure that a wide parish mission remains even after a school is established. One specific action that can be taken is to locate the governance of the school in an education commission under the parish pastoral council instead of in an autonomous school board. It is also useful if such an education commission concerns itself with the religious education of all children, even those that attend public schools and only come to weekly classes.

Another potentially useful action is to place reasonable limits on the percentage of parish income that is transferred to the school. While it is not reasonable to expect tuition to pay the entire costs of educating a child (due to the parish's educational mission), neither is it reasonable to expect parishes to transfer a large majority of its income to the school. It is not rare, according to anecdotal evidence from outside the Rockford Diocese, for some parishes to transfer more than 70% of parish income to the school. This leaves few financial resources available for the development of other parish ministries.

Finally, it would be useful to show parishioners, especially older ones, that the school is a means of integrating young people into the parish. This could address their fear that a Catholic school would necessarily diminish other parish ministries. It is uncertain, however, whether this premise is true, since some pastoral planners from other dioceses report that students from religious education classes (CCD) attend Mass more frequently than students from Catholic elementary schools. This anecdotal evidence awaits confirmation by valid empirical research.

## RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

While the Rockford Diocese seems to be demographically heterogeneous, it is possible that the results of this diocesan research are due to certain demographic variables that are unique to this diocese. The results may also be influenced by diocesan or parish leadership, or historical events. Replication

of this research in other dioceses or through a national random sample would help establish the generalizability of the conclusions.

Another area for future research is the effect of a person's age upon support of Catholic schools. Why do middle-aged Catholics show considerable less support of parochial schools than people just a decade younger? Is this due to an age effect or a cohort effect? One approach to this research question is to hold various focus groups to investigate the issue. Based upon the current research it would be important that the focus groups be held at both parishes with elementary schools and parishes without these schools. It would also be useful if the focus groups could be composed both of people who have graduated from Catholic schools and those who never attended Catholic schools.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The diocesan survey is available at <http://cppcd.org/crf/PCPSurv.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Only the summary of the analysis is presented here. For more information see the original paper at <http://cppcd.org/crf/ParishSchool.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to provide some objectivity to a variable about parish involvement, the following definitions were used.

1. *Very Highly Active* – on the parish staff or a council, a religious education teacher, or has high responsibility for a parish program or event.
2. *Highly Active* – involved in a liturgical ministry, some responsibility for a parish program or event, volunteers for some parish events.
3. *Somewhat Active* – attends some parish events outside of Mass but does not usually volunteer.
4. *Not Active Outside of Attending Mass*

<sup>4</sup> Previous analysis, using the parish as the unit of analysis, showed a significant negative correlation between the importance of access to Catholic schools and involvement in the parish. This correlation remained even after controlling for parish size. The implication is that parishes in which Catholic schools are very important may not be developing many opportunities for involvement in non-school ministries. When there are limitations of resources, leadership tends to put the resources into those areas that are seen as important by many people. The danger is that there will be fewer oppor-

tunities for adults without parochial school children to become involved in the parish outside of Sunday Mass.

<sup>5</sup> Attachment to the parish derives from the following subjective scale. The fourth option was coded as missing data.

How attached do you feel to your parish?

1. Very attached
2. Somewhat attached
3. Not at all attached
4. Not sure how I feel about this

<sup>6</sup> James Fowler makes an important contribution in this area in *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (1996). In this work he describes the paradigms of orthodox consciousness and progressive consciousness, and attempts to synthesize them into a practical postmodern religious consciousness based upon his conjunctive stage of faith.

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